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SUBJECT: Time for the Mauritians to go Home

#### Summary

1. (SBU) In a meeting with Charge d'Affaires, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) Regional Representative, Rosaline Idowu, was upbeat that a large percentage of the 20,000 Mauritanian refugees remaining in the Senegal River Valley would return home. She confirmed President Wade's statement that he would grant those that choose to stay Senegalese citizenship. She also emphasized that regionally the refugee situation had improved vastly and that as a result of reduced caseloads her regional office in Dakar would increase the number of countries that it oversees. End Summary

2. (SBU) Currently, there are some 20,000 Mauritanian refugees living in villages scattered across Senegal's northern border. Many of them have been there since 1989 and have refused to return unless the Mauritanian government could guarantee them return of the citizenship status which many lost after they were expelled by the then-ruling Junta. After winning the election, the new Mauritanian President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi pledged that this issue would be a top priority for his government and on June 29 he asked UNHCR for assistance in repatriating them. As of now UNHCR has prepared a tripartite agreement which it hopes the governments of Senegal and Mauritania will sign in September. The repatriation would then begin after the end of Ramadan. Idowu expects that it will take at most a year. On the Mauritanian side, the local UNHCR office will assist the returnees for a period of 18 months to include assistance with housing, schooling and employment. She optimistically expects about 14,000 to return with the remaining 6,000 staying in Senegal. Those remaining behind will do so because they have either married locally or found a niche which they do not want to leave.

3. (SBU) Regionally, Idowu has seen the refugee caseload drop significantly with the return of Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees to their home countries. She is also working with ECOWAS to amend their charter to allow refugees who do not want to return the right to stay and work via the issuance of a three year residency/work visa. Under the ECOWAS's charter, citizens of member countries have freedom of movement and can set up business within the ECOWAS zone. As a result of this diminishing caseload, UNHCR's Dakar office will be responsible for ten countries by 2008, and 14 by 2009.  
Smith